

To most of us who were keeping bees twenty and thirty years ago—as either a hobby or a livelihood- two of the chief attractions were the opportunity to work closely with the world of nature, and the seemingly miraculous qualities of the bees themselves. Only slightly less miraculous were the bee products themselves. Here we had--(and still have)--the best of all sweet things; a highly concentrated source of protein, vitamins and trace minerals; a plant extract with powerful anti-bacterial and anti-viral properties; a wax with innumerable uses; and a venom capable of curing arthritis and other far more serious diseases—in other words: honey, pollen, propolis, beeswax and bee venom. All of these products appeared as if by magic inside our wooden boxes, and were gathered from long distances or secreted by these incredible creatures to which we had become attached. Though honeybees at that time had their maladies and weaknesses, just like all living things do, they seemed overall to have a measure of health and vitality that was virtually unstoppable. Even after a severe setback from disease or poor conditions, the bees still retained one of the most important attributes of good health—resilience—and could make a dramatic recovery as soon as conditions were favorable once again. Good management required constant watching, and occasional drastic intervention (as in a case of AFB) but most of the time we had to learn how to keep out of the way and not interfere with their work and natural instincts. Bees could thrive on their own without being propped up with contraptions, medications, or the pronouncements of overeducated people—and this is what we loved most about them. In a society that was becoming increasingly unhealthy, unstable and self-destructive, the bees provided us with a constant reminder of the reality, and the importance of health, industry, and indeed the beauty of all creation.

But today we are struggling to regain all these important things, and apparently have no clear idea of how to go about it. We have allowed beekeeping to become part of the self-destructive system that is ruining our agriculture and society. Instead of focusing on the real basis of health, and how to restore it, we're using up most of our energy on stopgap solutions to very serious problems. It's the same now with bees and honey as it has long been with the production of other agricultural commodities: Once you're on this treadmill you use up a critical amount of your time and resources applying and paying for various nostrums concocted by the research community, drug companies, and the purveyors of agricultural chemicals. You've lost the energy and the money necessary to work out a healthy, long-term solution to your problems on the ground, and have become dependent on the aforementioned “authorities” to supply you with the latest (and most expensive) silver bullet for killing varroa mites, AFB spores, or whatever. The worst thing is that these stop-gap measures make the problem worse in the long run. Eventually, near catastrophic failures come with increasing frequency until the whole system comes crashing down. Are we at that point now in the bee business?

This stop-gap mentality has become so pervasive that even some of the important healthy beekeeping research is evaluated in these terms. Like bee breeding for example. I'm sure we all agree that selection and breeding are indispensable elements in the development of a good future for beekeeping. But what people envision is a queen that, once introduced into a colony, will make that colony immune to mites and diseases—a new and improved kind of silver bullet. I hate to be the one to tell you, but we're all going to be waiting for quite some time before any individual queen's workers can be guaranteed to rid a particular colony of its pests and diseases. All the beekeepers (including myself) who have succeeded in keeping a productive apiary going for some years without treatments are using management as their principal tool—with breeding as an essential component in that management. Breeding is a slow, step by step process; with real achievements accruing gradually over many years. The successes of the past, and the potential for future progress can only be safeguarded by constant attention and steady work. A sound and healthy system of management for the apiary, including the people who work there, is necessary for achieving long-term success in bee breeding.

As I said in last year's contribution to this magazine (Commercial Beekeeping Without Treatments of Any Kind; March/April 2005), what we're facing now is not just a problem of mites or unacceptable honey prices, but rather a whole series of problems that must be solved together in a comprehensive way. Mites and low honey prices are the most serious and immediate problems facing most North American beekeepers as I am writing this (Dec. 2005—honey prices may have risen considerably by the time you read this in the spring. If so it's likely because of serious, health related beekeeping problems in other countries). But many beekeepers are also feeling the effects of terramycin resistant AFB, the lack of young people entering the bee business, and the presence of Africanized bees in several of the country's traditional queen and package producing areas. And now, as more and more commercial beekeepers are trying to make a living by moving their bees on trucks thousands of miles each year, we're simultaneously feeling the first tremors of the "peak oil" phenomenon—high fuel prices in the wake of the 2005 hurricane season. By now most Americans have at least a conception that the world supply of oil is going to run out sometime during this century, and that we are fighting wars to secure our supply. But what most people don't realize is that the main oil-related shock to the U.S. and world economies is not going to come when the oil actually runs out, but much sooner than that—when demand pushes far ahead of the supply, and prices double and triple in short periods of time. This could happen relatively soon, and when it does, migratory beekeeping will cease to be a viable way of making a living.

So, as I see it, the old pattern of beekeeping is dying. A new beekeeping is struggling to be born, but has yet to reveal its shape and personality. We all know how important bees are; we want the baby to be born safely and have a long, happy and productive life. To help this happen—to solve our serious beekeeping problems in a comprehensive way—we need to refocus our energy at this point on a larger and more holistic concept of health: what this really

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Written by KirkWebster

means, and how we can utilize it in our apiaries, and eventually in our own lives as well. My own contribution to this cause is, of necessity, extremely limited. I'm just one beekeeper with a small apiary, and whose entire beekeeping experience was gained in just a few counties in New England. I'm struggling with these problems just like everyone else. But this is part of my point: we all need and enjoy learning from others, but farmers and beekeepers need to solve their own problems on the ground, in their own locations and circumstances. In this age of endless information and proliferation of experts, what seems to be missing is the independence, courage, self-confidence, good humor and wisdom necessary to solve our very serious biological problems. If I've made any progress on these fronts myself, it's likely because my education—both by happenstance and by design—was quite different from what most Americans experience. My teachers were great examples of success, and they encouraged me to think independently, to look at things in a wholistic way, and take the long view. I'm happy for you to copy any of my methods that have proved successful. But I'm much more interested in encouraging your own creativity and independence—so that you'll find the best solution in your own situation.

So, with that in mind, I conceived for this season a short series of essays, beginning by reprinting one I published in 1996: *The Natural Form of a Northern Apiary*, (with some new pictures and commentary). Following will be thoughts on: 1. **SOME PROBLEMS OF HEALTH AND DISEASE IN BEEKEEPING AND AGRICULTURE**; 2. **CELL BUILDING AND OVERWINTERING NUCS**; 3. **BEE BREEDING IN THE NORTH**; and 4. **THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HAVING A FARM AND HAVING A BUSINESS**. Then, during 2007, a monthly diary will try to give at least some idea of how the different jobs fit together in a self-sufficient northern apiary, weaned off of all treatments, and producing honey, nucs, queens and breeding stock for sale. But by the time you read this spring has come—at least on the calendar. The days are getting longer, and the time for scribbling on paper and tapping on computer keys is over. I hope your beekeeping season has gotten off to a great start.